

RUSSIA MONITOR

MONTHLY

July 2017



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2 July 2017

DEMOLITION WORTH BILLIONS OF DOLLARS

Vladimir Putin has recently signed the law on the basis of which Moscow's Soviet-era housing is set to be torn down starting in September. Since the very beginning, this idea has caused some controversies. The authorities and some friendly businessmen pretend to care about citizens, but at the same time they simply seek to take over perfectly located areas in overcrowded Moscow, in order to make money. Demolition of the buildings and resettlement of their inhabitants will trigger protests against the authorities. This case may become, at least in the Russian capital, an important point of the presidential campaign, of course with some negative consequences for Putin.

On July 1, the president signed a controversial act enabling the demolition of thousands of apartment blocks built during the Soviet era. This may mean the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of people. In mid-June, the bill was approved almost unanimously by the State Duma (399 to 2). Two weeks later, on June 28, it was accepted by the Federation Council, the upper house of Russian parliament. The law concerns about 4,500 apartment blocks built in the 1950s and 1960s. Among them there are many five-storey buildings, known as Khrushchevki, named after then Soviet-leader

Nikita Khrushchev. Nonetheless, members of parliament have reduced the scope of the demolition; originally, it was to affect even 8,000 apartment blocks.

Moscow authorities insisted that the buildings were outdated and they posed a threat to their inhabitants. However, many of the residents believe that it is only an excuse to build very expensive apartment and office buildings that are going to replace the old settlements, located in a valuable neighbourhood. Expelled inhabitants will be given apartments of the same size as the ones they were forced to leave. However, they will not necessarily be of the

same value. Work on the draft of the bill and its final adoption were accompanied by the protests of thousands of Muscovites. The mayor of Moscow, Sergei Sobyanin, a faithful executor of Putin's commands, announced that he will begin the implementation of the program in September. However, its main aim is to make real estate available in the prestigious neighborhoods of Moscow in order to make way for commercial buildings. The second objective is to guarantee work for the massive construction sector in the capital at the expense of the city budget. According to the law, the massive scale project will be governed by a renovation

assistance fund which was set up especially for this purpose in Moscow. It will combine representatives of the authorities, client and contractor. The program will last more than a decade (though probably much longer) and will be extremely expensive. Its total cost ranges from 68 to 103 billion dollars. It's a real bonanza for developers belonging to people from Putin's milieu. They have already earned billions, for instance during infrastructure work before the Olympic Games in Sochi. Now, they seek to make money in Moscow, thanks to the law which stipulates the mass expulsion of a significant part of Moscow's population.

4 July 2017

ASSETS OWNED BY “PUTINOCRATS”? IT'S A SECRET.

Duma has passed, and President has promptly signed a new law that allows for classifying any information about the assets owned not only by top Russian officials and their families, but also by every person indicated by Vladimir Putin. This seems to be a reaction of the authorities to their image problems caused by the anti-corruption crusade of Alexei Navalny, who – to Kremlin's surprise – is able to take thousands of demonstrators to the street.

Recent Navalny's revelations about the assets owned by Dmitry Medvedev as well as earlier reports on the property owned by Putin, for example those of Boris Nemcov (murdered over two years ago), and in particular recent demonstrations had most likely an impact on the decision to give Federal Guard Service the right to classify information about the property owned by state officials, such as Putin and Medvedev. With less than a year before the elections, the President strives to minimize the risk of any incidents that may hamper his re-election. That is why on 1 July he signed a new law which allows top government officials to conceal information on their bank accounts and assets.

In fact, the new bill introduces a number of amendments to several federal laws on state

security which govern the work of Federal Guard Service (FSO), the agency responsible for safety of the President, the Prime Minister and other key officials. One of the amendments contains a small but a significant clause: FSO should “protect personal data of all officials covered by state protection as well as personal data of their family members”. How are “personal data” defined then? Very broadly – pretty much everything may fall under the term. From the point of view of Russian law, personal data include all the information pertaining directly or indirectly to a person.

Who is covered by the new law? All those protected by FSO and their families. These include obligatorily: President Putin, Prime Minister Medvedev, Valentina Matviyenko – Chairman of the Federation Council,



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Vyacheslav Volodin – Chairman of the Duma, Valery Zorkin – Chairman of the Constitutional Court, Vyacheslav Levedev – President of the Supreme Court, Yury Chaika – Prosecutor General, and Alexandr Bastrykin – Chief of the Investigative Committee. FSO may also provide protection for members of the parliament, officials of federal agencies and – what is important – for any person indicated by the president. Based on this principle, FSO protects the head of Russian Orthodox Church – Patriarch Kirill. The full list of such persons remains unknown. It is confidential. Russian law does not define the notion of “family member”, which makes it possible to cover even very distant relations of state officials by the new law.

The draft law was submitted to the parliament last February by the President, but there was

nothing controversial in it at the beginning. The amendments providing for a possibility to conceal financial data have been introduced only between the first and the second reading of the draft bill. They were proposed by Vasilij Piskarev – a deputy of the ruling party, the United Russia and the chief of the Committee for Security. It is worth to remember that Piskarev had been the deputy chief of Investigative Committee, headed by Bastrykin, who is covered by the new law.

All state officials are still obliged to publish financial data concerning their income and their assets. However, the recently adopted new law implies that upon FSO’s request any information about the President, the Prime Minister etc. may be excluded from all public registers.



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4 July 2017

RUSSIA WANTS MORE TROOPS IN SYRIA

During the next round of Syria talks in Astana, the Russian delegation has agreed to send more battalions of a military police to Syria. Its aim is to protect one of the “de-escalation” zones located in the south of the country. Moscow seeks to implement this plan in order to increase its military presence in Syria, mostly by setting a third military base there.

This suggestion, submitted during the fifth round of talks in the capital of Kazakhstan, is related to the implementation of a stabilisation plan, which was elaborated on in Moscow at the end of April (we have mentioned the plan here and here). That could be achieved by dividing Syrian territory into four safe zones, hereby referred to as “de-escalation” zones. All signs indicate that Russia will send more of its troops to Syria, on the pretext of protecting these zones. But they will play a role of arbiter and not an ally of the government in Damascus, as it has been until now.

Apparently, the Russian suggestion is not surprising at all. In the Syrian city of Aleppo,

there are approximately 600 military police officers, mainly Muslims from Chechnya, who have been staying there for a couple of months. Moscow expects that its partners will also agree to such a solution in the southern part of the country. The increased presence of Russians in this area, namely on the southern battle front of the civil war, seems to be more acceptable for Jordan, Israel and the USA, according to whom, the dominance of the government army means the return of Hezbollah and pro-Iran forces.

Unofficially, it is said that due to the deployment of new forces, a new Russian military base may emerge, located in the town of Khirbet Raes al-Waer, about 50 kilometres

from Damascus, 100 kilometres from the border with Jordan and 110 kilometres from the Golan Heights. In the base there will be a coordination centre; its aim will be to enforce the agreement on “de-escalation” zones in Syria. Currently, Moscow has two military bases in the country: one of them is located in the harbour city of Tartus and the another can be found in Khmeimim, east of Latakia, also

on the coast of Syria. Under the treaty signed with President Assad, the territories of both bases have been leased to Russia for 49 years with a possibility of extension for a further 25 years. It is not known whether this agreement will also concern the third base. It is to be equipped with air defense systems, radar, missile launchers and houses for thousands of soldiers.



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5 July 2017

ONE BULAVA DOES NOT MAKE A SUMMER

A successful test of the Bulava intercontinental ballistic missile, the first such test since last fall, does not mean the end of problems with weapons of this kind. And it is the Bulava that is to be the basic weapon used in the Borei-class submarines that are to become the foundation of Russia’s nuclear deterrence. This shows that Russia’s very ambitious armament and modernization plans are implemented with major problems and growing delays.

The most recent test of the Bulava submarine-launched intercontinental ballistic missile (SLBM) took place on June 26, but the Defense Ministry informed about its success two days later. The test was carried out by the Northern Fleet. One of the newest underwater cruisers in the Russian fleet, Yuri Dolgoruky, launched the missile from the Barents Sea. The cruiser was in the fully submerged position and the tested Bulava successfully hit the designated target in the Kura practice range in Kamchatka. This

intercontinental ballistic missile of R-30 type is a sea equivalent of the land RS-24 Yars missiles. A single Bulava may carry up to 10 nuclear warheads for over 9,000 km.

This has been already the 28th test launch of the Bulava – as much as half of them have been a failure. This time the launch has been successful, but still there is no repeatability and the process of testing and preparations for service cannot be deemed completed. The previous test took place in September

2016 – two Bulavas were fired, also from the Yuri Dolgoruky submarine. One missile successfully reached its target, but the other one self-destructed during the first phase of the flight. Probably there was a breakdown or it was remotely detonated, because it got out of control.

The problems with Bulava have an impact on another armament program connected with it, namely the Borei submarine program. One of such submarines is Yuri Dolgoruky, used most frequently for testing the Bulavas. There are two more cruisers of this class in service: Alexander Nevsky and Vladimir Monomakh. Their total number is to be ten. In the first half of the 21st century, they are to become

the foundation of Russia's nuclear deterrence. Fuelled with nuclear power, the cruisers may carry 16 Bulava missiles – the main weapon of the Borei-class submarines. Without Bulavas, the Borei submarines are useless.

This, however, is not the only problem faced by Russians. New obstacles have emerged in another ambitious nuclear armament program, involving the Sarmata intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Test launching has been delayed and will not take place before the last quarter of 2017. Theoretically, the missile may still be ready by 2020, as planned by the Strategic Missile Troops. Yet, the same plan assumed that the first missiles would be launched in 2015.

11 July 2017

RUSSIANS ARE RETURNING TO CENTRAL ASIA

New perspectives on military presence in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia are standing open to Moscow. While Kyrgyzstan invites the Russian army to the Fergana Valley, Uzbekistan returns to military cooperation with Moscow. However, Russians must be careful here to avoid getting involved in local conflicts. The purpose is to strengthen the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military bloc which would act as a gendarme of Central Asia, principally serving as a form of protection from the Islamists (Afghanistan).

The President of Kyrgyzstan visited Russia between 19 and 24 June. During his visit, Almazbek Atambayev met with President Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and other high-ranking officials. Atambayev was supposed to offer Putin a new Russian base in Kyrgyzstan. The President agrees to the modernisation of the Kant air base, approximately 40 kilometres from the capital city of Bishkek, but not to expand the number of Russian military personnel in the base. Atambayev believes that Russian soldiers should be present in the south of the country, close to the border with Tajikistan, which – according to Atambayev – may have problems in the future with stopping the Islamists from

Afghanistan.

The base would be set up in the southernmost province of Batken, in the Kyrgyz part of the Fergana Valley. It is the most densely populated, the most economically developed and at the same time the most ethnically mixed region of Central Asia – in the past it used to be the arena of many bloody events. It was here in November 1998 that a coup d'état in northern Tajikistan was attempted, it was here that the militants from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) irrupted between 1999 and 2000, it was here that five years later Karimov bloodily crushed the protests in Andijan and it was also here that



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the following five years ethnic riots broke out (Uzbeks versus Kyrgyz) in southern Kyrgyzstan.

Atambayev's declaration, suggesting Tajikistan's vulnerability to Islamic threat, could not have been approved in Dushanbe, especially since there has long been a borderline conflict between these two countries. Also, what is more important, it was not approved in Tashkent. Uzbekistan is the second country, with which Kyrgyzstan shares the Fergana Valley. When Islam Karimov was the President of Uzbekistan, the Uzbeks did not want to hear about any conversation about a Russian base in the Fergana Valley. Now, it looks as if things are about to change.

On the 3rd of July, after the visit of a Russian delegation of the Ministry of Defence in the capital city of Uzbekistan, it was announced

that this year in October both countries will conduct joint military exercises, the first ones since 2005. They will be held at the Uzbek Forish training ground, approximately 250 kilometres southeast of Tashkent. This confirms a sharp turnaround in the relations between Tashkent and Moscow after a new president has taken over the office. It seems that Shavkat Mirziyoyev has got much better relations with Moscow than his predecessor. Concerning the deceased last year Karimov, one could say about a strong personal grudge against Russia. The fact that Tashkent is changing its course, was validated by recent anti-terrorist CSTO exercises in Tajikistan, dominated by Russians, in which the Uzbeks also participated. The next step might be – to Moscow's great expectation – the return of Tashkent to the CSTO, which Uzbekistan left in 2012.

11 July 2017

SCANDAL IN MOSCOW'S FSB

Information on the detention of FSB officers suspected of corruption has recently leaked to the media, which may confirm the escalation of some inter-group conflicts within the Russian security apparatus. In this case, it was Sergei Chemezov, head of the state corporation Rostec, who showed his strength.

Chemezov is known as one of the third most influential figures in the FSB,

including Alexander Bortnikov and Igor Sechin. The latter, just as Chemezov, plays



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a role in the business environment (he is the executive chairman of Rosneft); however, he retains considerable influence in the Lubyanka, the FSB headquarters (we wrote about it...). Since 2007, Rostec has controlled a company under the name Snegiryov Research Institute of Technology. It is not a regular enterprise, though; instead, it constitutes the largest Russian manufacturer of electromechanical and mechanical detonators for ammunition of different types. The group of FSB officials from Moscow made an attempt to extort large bribes from the board of the Institute. Instead, encroaching on Chemezov's territory (incidentally, also a KGB veteran) ended in disaster. Five officers have been detained; moreover, there will be probably some purges within the structures of Moscow's FSB directorate.

During its inspection at the Institute, the FSB detected some abuses; it was revealed that vacant posts within it were paid regular salaries. FSB officials met Igor Grigoriev, a director of the Institute, and threatened him that he may become a suspect in the case. What is more, for every "dead soul" that they found, they wanted to be paid a few millions rubles each. In return, the officials were supposed to sweep the case under the rug. In the meantime, Grigoriev took the matter to the FSB Internal Security Directorate.

A provocation was prepared, according to which the company's board, after discussion with FSB officials, set the amount of the bribe at 3 million rubles. The money was to be collected by Alexey Kruglov, a deputy chief of the 7th inter-district department, in a McDonald's restaurant. He was caught red-handed. Kruglov is the highest ranking among all the arrested officials and, along with Roman Nadezhdin, a field investigator, is suspected of receiving a bribe. The other three people, including a head of the FSB department in Balashikha, Denis Semyonov and two field investigators, are suspected of mediation in transferring the bribe.

The case is still developing and it will be used as an argument in FSB internal conflicts; undoubtedly, Chemezov may be perceived as having won, since he managed to protect "his" Institute thanks to the influence in the Lubyanka. At this moment, there is an anti-corruption inspection taking place in the FSB board for Moscow and the Moscow Oblast; as a result, one may expect some resignations within its directorate. At the same time, the only person who is safe is Alexei Dorofeev, a head of the board since 2012. He comes from Saint Petersburg and previously he had been in charge of the FSB in the Republic of Karelia (like Nikolai Patrushev was earlier).

15 July 2017

PROBLEMS WITH THE RUSSIAN PLAN FOR SYRIA

The plan for the creation of four so-called “de-escalation zones” in Syria, elaborated on by Moscow, is facing more and more obstacles. There is a progress related to the south zone, which may be considered as the effect of the talks with the USA and Jordan – but there are some serious problems with the other three. The Syrian opposition still does not agree to Iran’s presence during the arbitration; also Turkey delays its decisions. Moreover, the pressure on the Asian allies of Russia to make them secure potential security zones doesn’t bring any effects.

At the end of June, it was revealed that Moscow was carrying out some negotiations with the aim of deploying troops to Syria’s peacekeeping forces in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Arrangements for this matter were to take place during the next round of peace talks in Astana. However, the Russian efforts ended in failure – not only in terms of extending the circle of states eager to engage themselves in the “de-escalation zones” project.

The fifth round of talks in the capital of Kazakhstan took place on July 4-5, as a result, the Russians counted on another milestone in bringing their plan into life. However, the Russian-Turkish-Iranian trio has not reached an agreement on the final details of the creation of the so-called “de-escalation zones” in Syria. The head of the Russian negotiators asserted that the case was “basically agreed”, but there was still no agreement on the zones territory and the peacekeeping forces composition. Alexander Lavrentiev added that the Turkish representatives asked for more time as they had wished to prepare themselves for their participation in the zone surveillance. According to the head of the Kazakh diplomacy, Kairat Abdrakhmanov, Russia, Turkey and Iran will probably discuss details of the zones in Tehran on August 1-2. The sixth round of talks in Astana will take place at the end of August.

It is possible that, until then, Moscow will

be able to convince its allies from Central Asia to send their troops to Syria. Lavrentiev, whose words have been quoted above, said that Russia had called on member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to consider sending military observers to the “de-escalation zones”. The case became widely discussed when the chairman of the Duma defense committee and the former air force commander General Vladimir Shamanov said that Russia was negotiating with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in order to convince them to send their troops to Syria. They would join the international contingent whose aim was to monitor whether the truce is respected within the so-called “de-escalation zones”. On the same day, there was an information from Ibrahim Kalin, a special representative of the President of Turkey on Syria. He confirmed that the Russians were continuing its discussions about military observers from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Ankara sought to mention this topic during the fifth round of talks in Astana in July. The outcome of these talks confirmed that the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs don’t even rush to send their soldiers to a “foreign war”. They put numerous conditions, but it is possible that this is just a strategy used during negotiations with Moscow, which invokes an alliance within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Of course, from a military point of view, sending to Syria even hundreds of Kyrgyz and Kazakhs doesn’t have any special meaning.



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What seems to be important is the political aspect. In this way, Putin seeks to expand its own international coalition. Today, in fact, its only military ally is Iran. Such a situation can't

be compared to another coalition fighting against the Islamic State in Syria led by the United States.



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17 July 2017

RUSSIA COVERS MH17 TRACKS

Three years after the Malaysian Boeing airliner flying over Donbass was shot down, new facts seem to come out which may confirm Russia's responsibility for the disaster. Moscow has tried to cover up traces, by isolating potential witnesses in the trial. Resistance from the Russian side seems to dissatisfy those countries which are most concerned with punishing those who were responsible for the tragedy. The head of Australian diplomatic corps has already announced that the defendants may be subject to judgement in absentia.

Representatives of the international investigation group whose aim is to establish the reasons of the disaster, have created a list of 120 people who were engaged in the shooting down of the Malaysia Airlines aircraft. Among them, one can find Colonel Vasily Geranin of the Russian GRU (Russian military intelligence service).

At the beginning of June, an international group of investigative journalists InformNapalm, published information that Geranin had been detained by the FSB. The board member of the Union of Donbass Volunteers, an organization associating Russian veterans of the war in Ukraine, was to be arrested on May 10 in Moscow. Colonel

Geranin is the key witness in the shooting down of the Malaysian Boeing flight MH17, which took place three years ago. He also participated in the annexation of Crimea and then he personally supervised a rebel, Igor Bezler, known by his nom-de-guerre "Bies", in Donbass. After July 20, his name became public once the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) published an intercepted call between Bezler and Geranin on the downed MH17, according to which it was the rebels' fault.

In May, a brief note about the detention of Geranin appeared in Russian online media but it was quickly removed from all sites. It was reported that Geranin was detained because during a routine road check, it was

discovered that he was allegedly transporting a fragmentation munition for a grenade launcher in his car. Also his apartment in Kubinka, a town located in the Moscow Oblast, was searched and it was said that many more illegal arms and weapons had been found. At the moment of detention, Geranin was still an active military counterintelligence officer but after being placed under arrest he was fired from the GRU, with the time of his firing being backdated. The fact that the GRU officer was arrested may be an element of a larger operation conducted by the Russian forces and its aim is to alienate witnesses and to destroy all evidence before the trial planned for autumn this year in the Netherlands. Immediately after the detention of Geranin, also the apartments of the Union of Donbass Volunteers were also searched by the special forces.

At the same time, it was revealed that on the night of July 16 to July 17 Russia introduced some restrictions for civil aviation flights in Russian airspace, nearby the Ukrainian border, at a height below 16,000 metres, which exactly corresponds to the maximum

reach of the Buk missile system. A few hours later the Malaysian Boeing was shot down in Ukrainian airspace, close to its border with Russia. Asked about the prohibition issued at midnight on July 17 by the Dutch Security Council, the Russian civil aviation authorities replied that their intention had been to adapt to the situation on the Ukrainian side of the border. However, Ukraine introduced the maximum limit at the height of 9,454 metres and not 16,150 metres, which was the case for the Russians.

The case of the MH17 disaster will be examined by the Dutch court and those presumed guilty will incur a penalty in accordance to the law of that country. Australia's Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, stated that the perpetrators of the disaster of the Malaysian passenger plane could be subject to judgment in absentia. Bishop also called on Moscow to comply with every point of the UN Security Council Resolution 2166, which provides for the cooperation of all states in order to punish all the people guilty of the Malaysian Airlines catastrophe.

17 July 2017

SENTENCES FOR KILLING NEMTSOV

It all went according to plan. The executors of Boris Nemtsov's assassination were found guilty and sentenced to jail. Further links in the conspiracy will remain secret and the investigation will go on for years. Long enough to get rid of people – currently in hiding – who can somehow associate the assassins with Ramzan Kadyrov.

From the outset, when in March 2015 the five Chechens suspected of killing Nemtsov were arrested, the investigation was conducted so as to bury the clues that may lead to the mastermind behind the killing. It is possible that at the beginning some influential Kadyrov's enemies in the federal security apparatus wanted to hit the Chechen President. The spring of 2015 was a turbulent period in Moscow politics, but finally Putin

not just maintained but even extended his full power, and he protected his faithful protégé Kadyrov once again.

When arrested, the accused pleaded guilty, but when given lawyers, they withdrew their depositions and said they had been tortured. During the trial they claimed to be innocent. However, all signs indicate that they did kill the oppositionist. On 29 June, the jury



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concluded that all the accused were guilty of murder. Zaur Dadaev, an ex officer of the Sever Battalion of Russia's Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, was found to have shot Nemtsov. Dadaev was sentenced to 20 years of penal colony. The remaining four got 11 to 19 year sentences. Two of them, like Dadaev, were connected with Chechen power structures, same as Ruslan Mukhutdinov, suspected of commissioning the assassination and wanted by the police.

Despite all this, Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, asserted that the issue of possible consequences for Chechen law enforcement agencies in which the assassins had served "has absolutely nothing to do with the Kremlin's agenda". Also Kadyrov's reaction is a testament to his strong position and confidence. He judged Nemtsov's trial sentencing "strange", evidence of guilt "doubtful", and stated that "an information war was being waged against Chechnya and its people". Two years ago, when Dadaev was

arrested, Kadyrov would praise him. However, the greatest victory of the Chechen leader is the fact that the organizers and commissioners are not in the dock.

The Investigative Committee assured that it would continue to search for the crime organizers and repeated that according to the investigators, the assassination had been commissioned, for money, by Mukhutdinov. He left Russia and is currently hiding in the United Arab Emirates. Mukhutdinov was, however, at most a go-between. He was a driver of Ruslan Geremeev, an ex deputy commander of the Sever Battalion. Most probably, it was Geremeev who commissioned the murder and paid for it. And it was not his independent decision, but rather an execution of orders from the heights of power in Grozny. A question remains: did Kadyrov decide to silence Nemtsov (and make Putin happy, he thought) on his own, or did so under the influence of Kremlin, which is eager to use Kadyrov's people for doing dirty work.



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18 July 2017

RUSSIA WILL STAY IN SYRIA FOR A LONG TIME

The Russian Federation makes its military presence in the civil war-torn Syria official, which shows once again that the country wants to build its Middle-East fronton there, regardless of the result of the conflict. This is a necessary condition if Russia still seeks to keep its position in the game played by world powers. However, the Russian strategy in Syria has several weak points and, as a result, the chances for a peaceful end to the conflict are practically equal to zero, especially if one takes into account the significant participation of Moscow in this matter. After another period of a relative de-escalation, it is possible that the tension will only intensify.

On July 14, the State Duma, a lower house of the parliament, ratified a protocol to the agreement on a deployment of the Russian air forces groups in Syria. The document, signed in January, regulates the legal and financial issues related to the group's stationing. Moreover, it transforms a temporary location of Russian air forces into a permanent military base abroad. According to the chairman of the State Duma Committee for International Affairs, Leonid Slutsky, "bearing in mind the situation of terrorist groups in Syria, we realize that our troops

will remain there for a long time." The base is protected from the outside by the Syrians, whereas anti-aircraft defense and interior guard shall be guaranteed by the Russians. The staff enjoys immunity. Vladimir Shamanov, the chairman of the Defense Committee of the State Duma, has announced that the "matter of ratification" of the second agreement between Moscow and Damascus discussed in January is approaching and it will concern the extension of the Russian naval base in the harbour of Tartus by the Mediterranean Sea.

Such steps, excessively publicised by media, aim to build an image of a victorious Russia in Syria, which is important right before the presidential elections in 2018. By consolidating its military presence, Russia has continued the diplomatic operation whose aim is to show the country as the main peacemaker in the Syrian conflict. However, in order to achieve so, Russia needs to establish relations with the USA as well as it should be ready to compromise. Nevertheless, there are many reasons that such a limited cooperation with the Americans, as exemplified by a truce in the southern part of the country, announced after the Hamburg meeting

between Putin and Trump, will not last long. There are too many contradictions and tensions between Americans on the one hand and Iran and Asad on the other. In the case of such a confrontational situation, the Kremlin always takes the side of its allies. The second contradiction in the Russian strategy in Syria is the fact that Moscow seeks to create four so-called “de-escalation zones”, and it would welcome further progress in the offensive of Asad at the same time. In most cases, such dilemmas end up with the Kremlin’s choice of an aggressive option. Thus, it means more conflict escalations.

18 July 2017

WHO WILL COMBAT „THE EXTREMISTS”?

It seems that the National Guard, Kremlin’s favorite in Russian security apparatus, will – again – grow in power. There have been rumors that MVD will lose some of its structures, and that the beneficiary will, once more, be Rosgvardiya. It has already taken over military formations (Internal Troops, OMON, SOBR), and now the time has come for the so-called “Center-E”, engaged in operational and investigative activity. The transfer of this structure to Rosgvardiya should strengthen it even more in the face of social anxieties expected at Kremlin.

First, the news appeared in the Izvestia daily, which is known for having published leaks about the situation in the services before. On July 18, the newspaper reported that changes taking place in the Interior Ministry’s General Administration for Combating Extremism (the so-called Center “E”) indicate that MVD is going to lose that structure. According to Izvestia, the management of MVD in Moscow transferred 11 vacancies from Center “E” to other investigative units. Similar processes are said to be taking place also in other regions of the country. Moreover, Center “E” has not employed any new staff for some time. A recent relocation of Federal Security Service to buildings where General Administration for Combating Extremism is located is to indicate that this structure will soon be transferred to

another institution. In this way MVD wants to avoid losing a valuable property along with Center “E”.

The Interior Ministry – as part of which Center “E” was established in autumn 2008 – quickly denied these reports. However, there have been speculations for a long time that operational and investigative tasks of combating extremism and terrorism will be handed over to the National Guard. Currently, Rosgvardiya has no right to conduct such activity. When appropriate changes are introduced, it will gain such right as well as people to enforce it. This will be a consecutive logical step to extend the rights conferred on the National Guard, otherwise called Putin’s praetorians. It should also expedite the fight



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against chief enemy, for which this formation was originally created, namely street protests, demonstrations and social revolt. Currently Rosgvardiya, which breaks up demonstrations using former OMON units, has to rely in its operational and investigative activities (including surveillance, agents) on assistance of Center “E”, which is a part of MVD (as OMON used to be). Removing Center “E” from MVD is supposed to make suppressing demonstrations more effective.

At present, Rosgvardiya has to use services of other institutions (MVD, FSB) in some areas (surveillance, eavesdropping etc.). MVD, on the other hand, after losing OMON and SOBR (spetsnaz for fighting organized crime), lacks enforcement units, such as trained people to protect its other activities. The will to deal with such difficulties will inevitably lead to increased centralization of competences, assets and people in the National Guard – a favorite of Putin – at the cost of, mostly, MVD,

but also FSB. This, in turn, will inevitably lead to tension inside Russia’s elaborate security apparatus.

This was confirmed within a few hours after the denial of Izvestia information, when the leadership of MVD launched counterattack. Deputy Minister Alexandr Gorovoy stated that the police intend to “uncompromisingly prevent” the infringement of law during presidential elections in March 2018. As Gorovoy noted, judging by protests in March and June, there might be many those “interested” in breaking the law. Such declarations of MVD, made just after it has lost more assets and competences, are not the last ones. There is going to be plenty more servile addresses to Putin and claims by Kremlin that “we are necessary and we are the ones who will protect the regime best”. The party fares worse in such rivalry will keep losing their influence, people and means. The actual security will become less important.



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19 July 2017

MOSCOW INSISTS ON THE DACHA ISSUE

Refraining from reacting after the expulsion of more than 30 Russian diplomats from the United States seems to be one of the strongest arguments for how much the Kremlin had hoped for fruitful cooperation with Donald Trump. The new president has not revoked his predecessor's decision, but after more than six months, Russia has to do something about it. The country's recent proposals indicate that they simply seek to withdraw from this diplomatic dispute and save face at the same time.

Russia exerts some pressure on Georgia with the aim of forcing numerous concessions from the latter. The point is to establish so-called „trade corridors” through Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Russians pursue to get an access to the railway line linking Sochi, Sukhumi, Tbilisi and Yerevan as well as the motorway between Vladikavkaz and Tbilisi. At the same time, they are gradually advancing into the direction of the motorway linking Baku with the coast of the Black Sea.

At the beginning of July, large military exercises of the Russian army have started in Abkhazia, whose territories have been

under the Russian occupation; similar ones have already ended in South Ossetia, also controlled by Russia. Once they were finished, Russian border guards (who can be found on the administrative line separating Ossetia from Georgia) have moved boundary markers some 600 to 800 metres deep into the Georgian territory. As a result, Georgia was said to lose about 10 hectares of its land. At the same time, Russian guards (it needs to be added that they are subject to FSB, known as the Federal Security Service) have put some barriers on the boundary. Moscow has been known for such a strategy for many years. This time, on July 4, the Russian pushed the “administrative boundary” in the Gori district.

Thus, some agriculture plots and properties belonging to several Georgian citizens could be found on the other side of the border. The soldiers have placed “boundary markers” near two Georgian villages of Bershueti and Sobisi. Thanks to such an idea, the Russian controlled territories only a half a kilometre far from the motorway linking such cities as Baku, Tbilisi, Poti and Batumi, which constitutes an essential route for the entire South Caucasus.

The actions undertaken by the Russians have been criticized by the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM). The President of Georgia, Giorgi Margvelashvili, called Russia’s actions a “creeping occupation”. Georgian complaints on pushing boundary markers deep into its territory have been considered by Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an “informational provocation”. The situation wasn’t appeased even after the

meeting between the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Grigory Karasin, and the Special Representative for Matters of Relations with Russia, Zurab Abashidze, that took place in Prague on July 7. Russia and Georgia do not maintain any diplomatic relations. These were cut after Russia aggressed Georgia in August 2008 and Moscow recognised the independence of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Since then, both countries have been contacting each other through Swiss diplomats in appropriate interest sections of the Swiss embassies in Moscow and Tbilisi. The ruling Georgia Dream coalition has mentioned its willingness to re-establish diplomatic relations with Russia; in order to achieve so, a position of the Special Representative for Matters of Relations with Russia had been brought to life. The function is currently exercised by the former Georgian ambassador to Moscow.

19 July 2017

MALOROSSIYA IS A RUSSIAN IDEA

Leaders of the self-proclaimed people’s republics in the part of Donbass occupied by Russia do not take any significant action without Moscow’s consent. Most frequently, without Moscow’s express order. Also the concept to establish Malorossiia (Little Russia) is not Alexandr Zakharchenko’s idea. In this way, Russia is building up tension in the Ukraine, however only for a short time. The very idea (even the name) is so absurd from the start that it cannot last for long.

Leaders of the so called Donetsk People’s Republic, Alexandr Zakharchenko, announced on July 18 that separatists from Donetsk and Lugansk, and also from other regions of the Ukraine (significantly, excluding the Crimea), will create a new federal state. The very name of this proposed state – referring to the times of Russian supremacy over the Ukraine – makes the idea ridiculous. The concept of making Donetsk not Kiev the capital of such a “state” is just as ridiculous. It has been obvious for a long time that Russia’s strategic objective is not the annexation

of Donbass but indirect control by pro-Russian authorities over the entire Ukraine (alternatively Ukraine’s breakup). Surely, this cannot be achieved by evoking the times when the current Ukrainian territory was divided into Russian governorates.

Some of early commentaries suggest that the Malorossiia project is yet another Russian idea for the Ukraine, after the famous Novorossiia project of 2014. The difference, however, is that Novorossiia was supported by Moscow and it had a chance for success. Also, it was



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limited to southern and eastern Ukraine, but finally it was abandoned after a series of failures. Malorossiia, on the other hand, is an “original” idea of only the Donetsk part of the occupied region of Donbass. Authorities of the neighboring separatist so-called Lugansk People’s Republic have distanced themselves from the idea. Obviously, Kremlin renounced the idea, stating that it was devised by Zakharchenko, and that Moscow learnt about it from the media. Remarkably, however, Putin’s spokesman stated that he would not comment on the proposed proclamation of Malorossiia, adding however that “this is subject to reflection and analysis”. Thus the topic was not dropped immediately. Russians produced the idea themselves and now they

will play it out. In what way? In line with their old tradition: raise the stakes so later you have something to give up, however in exchange for actual concessions of the other party. The declaration on the establishment of Malorossiia may bring to a standstill the negotiations on the conflict in the eastern Ukraine. It is clear that Zakharchenko did not devise the idea himself. It was Kremlin’s order. The following day, Vladislav Surkov, Kremlin curator for Donbass, pointed out that the Malorossiia projects demonstrates, first of all, that the “authorities in Donbass” are fighting not for secession from the Ukraine, but for its integrity. Any doubts that Moscow may consider formal annexation of the occupied part of Donbass should now be dispelled.

20 July 2017

TURKISH STREAM OR SOUTH STREAM

A threat of the new sanctions to be imposed is hanging like the sword of Damocles and it forces Russia to speed up work on the gas pipeline construction to Turkey. However, it is not known whether Gazprom will manage to finish both lines on time, thanks to which the country may get the opportunity to open for markets in Southern and Central Europe.



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According to the news published on July 19 by the Russian business daily Vedomosti, Gazprom has been building the second line of Turkish Stream pipeline; they have already completed between 20 and 25 kilometres under the sea. The spokesman of Gazprom, Sergei Kupriyanov, said on the same day that the company had been carrying out some preparatory work in order to construct the second line of the South Stream; however, it is too early to state that works have already begun. Nevertheless, it is very likely that the Russians are in rush to start building the second line. Since now, Gazprom has informed only about the first line of Turkish Stream running through the bottom of the Black Sea; the aim of the pipeline is to transport gas to Turkey (on July 10, the Russian Minister of Energy, Alexander Novak, informed that so far about 50 kilometres of the line have been completed). The gas from the second line would be sent to Europe via Turkey. It is highly possible that the United States will adopt new sanctions on for example those Western companies that cooperate with the Russians during the export pipeline construction, and, in the light of such an event, Gazprom is forced to speed up works on Turkish Stream. If the sanctions are introduced, it is likely that the pipeline will not be built as Russia doesn't have at its

disposal any technologies that would enable the offshore pipeline installation.

Turkish Stream is a pipeline project linking Russia with Turkey and running on the bottom of the Black Sea. It is supposed to be composed of two lines, each of them with a capacity of 15.75 billion cubic metres a year. The first line will provide the gas for the Turkey's own needs. The second one however could be intended to import the gas with the aim of re-exporting it back to Europe. At the end of October, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, announced that the country would be ready to extend one of the lines on the European Union territory only if it provided Russia with written guarantees that the project would be implemented. If that happened, Turkish Stream would actually become a new, but somehow poorer version of South Stream project, which was abandoned by Moscow when it had turned out that the European Union had protested against its construction. The only difference is that Turkish Stream would go to the Bulgarian shore not by the sea but via Turkey and thus, less gas will be transported. Recently, Gazprom has reached an agreement with Turkish authorities in Ankara on financing of the construction of Turkish Stream above-ground part, which will reach Turkey (costs

are expected to reach 11.4 billion euros), and has signed “road maps” with Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary; they concern the development of a pipeline to deliver gas from the planned second line of Turkish Stream.

The construction started on May 7. The head

of Gazprom, Alexey Miller, announced that two lines would have been completed by 2019, that is the time when Nord Stream 2 is going to be launched). Starting from 2019, Russia intends to stop sending its gas through pipelines running by the territory of Ukraine.



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23 July 2017

THE POTEMKIN FLEET

Russia has always been a land power and its attempts to obtain the status of a naval one always ended in a heavy defeat. Even in Soviet times, no one could compare Moscow to the U.S. Navy. And there are no indications that the situation could change now. The moods seem to be somehow optimistic but due to a limited budget, only nuclear submarines will be upgraded and that is their combat potential that will be increased.

The President of Russia have signed off a new state policy for the its navy. The 22-page document has been published right after its signing by Vladimir Putin on July 20. The strategy is binding until 2030. According to the paper’s main arguments, the United States seeks to dominate the world’s oceans, which constitutes a real threat to Russia. The

document focuses also on the issue of Arctic and thus it corroborates previous declarations of the representatives of the Russian navy, who claimed that it was a “priority development area for Moscow”. In their naval strategy, the Russians highlight that the U.S.A, along with some other countries, aim to restrict Russia’s access to marine resources as well as to some

important sea routes.

So how does Russia intend to respond to the above-mentioned challenges? Due to the state weapons programme for the years 2018–2025, a new aircraft carrier will be designed, which was confirmed at the end of June by Viktor Bursuk, the deputy commander-in-chief of the Russian navy. He also added that projects of two helicopter carriers, similar to the French Mistral class, will be prepared as well. The state weapons programme for the years 2018–2025 is expected to be ready in September. His project may however limit naval ambitions of Russia and mean that the country focuses on building a military power on land. Because of the recent economic problems, the measures intended for armament in subsequent years may be up to 50% smaller than it was once expected by generals. Thus, expenses will be cut and serious choices will have to be made. The first victim of savings will be the fleet; interestingly, this is precisely the part of the Russian army that requires an urgent modernisation. Even if over the last decade considerable amount of money has been invested into naval force, its core constitutes

of either small or old ships. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia hasn't launched any new type of surface ship larger than a frigate. In May, Dmitry Rogozin, Deputy Prime Minister in charge of defence industry, declared that, unlike the United States, Russia was not a naval power. It was confirmed in mid-May by the meeting between Putin and generals. Some time after, media reported that the plans of building new destroyers and an aircraft carrier have been postponed for an unlimited time. The only part of naval force that may count on considerable financing and development are nuclear submarines. As the basis of the Russian military doctrine is nuclear deterrence, all three atomic parts of "troika" will be developed and thus, next to nuclear bombers and missiles fired up from land, there will be also submarines armed with nuclear weapons. Borey-class submarines are expected to constitute the core of this part of the naval force. Currently, three of them are in service: Yuriy Dolgorukiy, Aleksandr Nevskiy and Vladimir Monomakh. In total, there are going to be ten of them and in the first half of the 21st century they will constitute the core of the Russian nuclear deterrence system.

23 July 2017

KREMLIN FILTERS GOVERNORS

Everything is going to happen lightning fast, without loud campaigns, the opposition and any second rounds. The Kremlin accelerates the implementation of "the 2017 gubernatorial elections". Previously introduced mechanisms allow to sift out potentially bothersome candidates, so the elections in all sixteen oblasts and republics will be won by the power people, usually governors and presidents who are still in office.

In September 2017 direct elections of governors in 16 entities of the Russian Federation will be held. The election campaign was formally launched in June, but just in April Putin began to visit the regions where the elections will take place in the autumn. It is the president who bore the burden of the upcoming elections, not the prime minister and the official leader of the United Russia party, Dmitry Medvedev. The burden can be defined as corruption charges against Dmitry

Medvedev made by Alexei Navalny and the resulting two waves of demonstrations.

Practically speaking, it has been decided that the candidates from the party in power will win almost everywhere. The main tool for eliminating potentially real competitors is the so-called "municipal filter", which was introduced a few years ago along with the restoration of direct governor elections. What exactly is this procedure about? The



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requirement is to gather the appropriate number of signatures from the members of the city councils in the oblast (from 5 to 10 percent) for a politician seeking to run for governor office. What is important, a deputy may support only one candidate. In practice, it means the elimination of the opposition politicians in the upcoming elections.

It turned out that the victim of the municipal filter is the mayor of Yekaterinburg, Yevgeny Roizman. He announced on July 18 that he was withdrawing from the gubernatorial election in the Sverdlovsk Oblast, because there was not enough signatures from local municipal deputies to register his candidature. Roizman wanted to run as the candidate from the liberal opposition party Yabloko. A similar problem might be experienced by a Communist Vyacheslav Marchayev (Buryatia) and the candidate from A Just Russia, Irina Pietyelyayeva (Karelia). However, the latter has the best chance of being the only

representative of the opposition in the autumn regional elections.

Of course, to preserve the guise of democracy, the governors in office or the Kremlin themselves will help collecting the right number of signatures for candidates who will not threaten the favourites. This year, however, the Kremlin (in the person of a case supervisor, Sergey Kiriyyenko) advised the governors that the favourites would not have rivals strong enough for the second round. It is all about closing these elections as soon as possible, so that there will be a long break between the regional and presidential elections in March 2018. As had been previously reported, one of the biggest challenges for the Kremlin will be to ensure a high turnout of voters when choosing a president. A short interval between the regional and presidential elections may mean that some voters will not want to go to the ballot box for the second time in a row.



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24 July 2017

CREEPING BORDER

Large military exercises in neighboring “republics”, diplomatic pressure and some border provocations – these are some of the examples of the cruel pressure that Russia exerts on Georgia. Both countries do not seek to normalise their relations, even by re-establishing diplomatic relations cut in 2008. The priority is to take control of some critical routes in the region, mostly by interrupting the ones that follow lines of latitude and connect the Caucasus with Europe (it constitutes an essential energy connection) and by strengthening the roads that correspond to the lines of longitude and bring together Russia, Armenia and Iran.

Russia exerts some pressure on Georgia with the aim of forcing numerous concessions from the latter. The point is to establish so-called „trade corridors” through Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Russians pursue to get an access to the railway line linking Sochi, Sukhumi, Tbilisi and Yerevan as well as the motorway between Vladikavkaz and Tbilisi. At the same time, they are gradually advancing into the direction of the motorway linking Baku with the coast of the Black Sea.

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under the Russian occupation; similar ones have already ended in South Ossetia, also controlled by Russia. Once they were finished, Russian border guards (who can be found on the administrative line separating Ossetia from Georgia) have moved boundary markers some 600 to 800 metres deep into the Georgian territory. As a result, Georgia was said to lose about 10 hectares of its land. At the same time, Russian guards (it needs to be added that they are subject to FSB, known as the Federal Security Service) have put some barriers on the boundary. Moscow has been known for such a strategy for many years. This time, on July 4, the Russian pushed the “administrative boundary” in the Gori district.

Thus, some agriculture plots and properties belonging to several Georgian citizens could be found on the other side of the border. The soldiers have placed “boundary markers” near two Georgian villages of Bershueti and Sobisi. Thanks to such an idea, the Russian controlled territories only a half a kilometre far from the motorway linking such cities as Baku, Tbilisi, Poti and Batumi, which constitutes an essential route for the entire South Caucasus.

The actions undertaken by the Russians have been criticized by the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM). The President of Georgia, Giorgi Margvelashvili, called Russia’s actions a “creeping occupation”. Georgian complaints on pushing boundary markers deep into its territory have been considered by Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs as an “informational provocation”. The situation wasn’t appeased even after the

meeting between the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Grigory Karasin, and the Special Representative for Matters of Relations with Russia, Zurab Abashidze, that took place in Prague on July 7. Russia and Georgia do not maintain any diplomatic relations. These were cut after Russia aggressed Georgia in August 2008 and Moscow recognised the independence of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Since then, both countries have been contacting each other through Swiss diplomats in appropriate interest sections of the Swiss embassies in Moscow and Tbilisi. The ruling Georgia Dream coalition has mentioned its willingness to re-establish diplomatic relations with Russia; in order to achieve so, a position of the Special Representative for Matters of Relations with Russia had been brought to life. The function is currently exercised by the former Georgian ambassador to Moscow.

25 July 2017

RUSSIA’S GAMES FOR BELGRADE

It appears that Serbia, under a new president, is more clearly turned towards Russia. One of the signs of closer cooperation between the two countries is not only the purchase order of Russian armaments made by Belgrade, but also the attitude of the Serbs on a so-called “Humanitarian Centre” in Niš, highly questionable by the West, which could develop into a strong unofficial westernmost centre of the Russian intelligence service and army.

The Serbian-Russian rapprochement is increasingly alarming the West. Belgrade’s relations with Moscow were one of the subjects discussed at the meeting in mid-July between President Aleksandar Vučić and US Vice President Mike Pence. One of the issues of particular concern for the Western states is the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre in Niš. Since its establishment in 2012, the Russians asserted that its aim is to prevent natural disasters and industrial catastrophes that have nothing to do with politics. From the very beginning, however, it was clear that under the cover of such actions, Moscow has been installing military and intelligence personnel in Niš. Hoyt Brian Yee, a high-ranking US Department of State official, said

in May that the Centre might have more important objectives, such as influencing public opinion, which in a way seems to confirm its status. Especially since the Russian side expects the Centre staff to obtain diplomatic immunity. Moscow and its Serbian supporters argue that they only want the same treatment as NATO personnel in Serbia. The Head of the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ivica Dačić, declared that the status of the highly controversial and feared by the West Serbian-Russian centre in the country’s third largest city will soon be determined. In a press interview published on July 20, Dačić announced that the Belgrade government will soon decide whether to grant diplomatic immunity to the personnel of the Centre. He



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also added that he himself is in favor of such a solution. In any case, the pro-Russian moods prevail among the entire leadership of the state.

After taking the office of the President, Aleksandar Vučić is visibly turned towards Russia (as Prime Minister, he tried to equalise the distance to both the East and West). One of his priorities in politics towards Moscow is to purchase from the Russians as many weapons as it is possible. Serbia has already received the first supplies, allowing Vučić to maintain that his country's military power is growing almost overnight. In the statements made by Serbian politicians, it can be noticed that militant rhetoric is skilfully fueled by

Russia, whose aim is to destabilise the Western Balkans. Currently, the shortest way to do so is to antagonise the Serbs with their neighbours. Russian media and experts remind the proud Serbs that they suffered defeats in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and then lost their own province: Kosovo. The Russians have highlighted the weakness of the Serbian army over the past few decades and its growing potential in recent years – of course, thanks to Russian aid. It seems that Moscow is fueling conflicts and trying to drive a wedge between Belgrade, its neighbours and the West, knowing that if the Serbs make a civilizational choice and they go to the EU, it will indicate that Serbia recognises Kosovo as a state. And then Russia will be of no use to Belgrade.

25 July 2017

RUSSIA CONTROLS, SYRIA BOMBS

Moscow has done the next step towards an implementation of the plan to create so-called “de-escalation zones” in Syria, which was announced in May. At the end of the previous week, Russian military police appeared in two zones where ceasefire had been introduced. Russia’s presence as ceasefire guards in the rebel enclave east of Damascus did not prevent Al-Assad’s air force from carrying out raids on these territories. As a result, civilians were killed.

It seems that concerns expressed by critics of the Russian “peace plan” can be confirmed

and this plan may constitute only a pretext to strengthen the regime’s forces in this area.

It can be particularly noticed in this “de-escalation zone” where neither American nor Jordanian guarantees can be given.

On July 21 and 22, the Russian military command deployed its military forces in two de-escalation zones (out of proposed four): in south-west Syria and near Damascus. The troops’ main task will be to monitor whether the ceasefire is respected. It is not known exactly how many soldiers are on their observation posts. In the zone in the south-west of the country (governorates of Daraa, Quneitra and As-Suwayda) the truce was introduced on July 9, right after the Hamburg’s meeting between Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. Here, the Russians deployed 12 military police posts; Moscow has asserted that Americans, Jordanians and Israelis had been informed about this event in

advance.

In fact, the second zone has existed since Saturday, July 22. The same day the government army announced a halt in fighting for some parts of Eastern Ghouta. This enclave, located north-east from Damascus, constitutes one of the few zones controlled by the rebellion, situated around the capital occupied by regime forces. In total, Russia has deployed six posts, including two checkpoints and four observation posts. However, on Sunday 23 July, Syrian air force carried out six attacks in the towns of Douma and Ein Tarma. Further air strikes were conducted after Moscow had officially confirmed presence of its troops on this territory. In the night from July 24 to July 25, at least 9 civilians were killed in regime war planes’ raids whereas 30 people were injured.

26 July 2017

“SECRET PRISON” OF FSB

The information that the Federal Security Service (the FSB) kidnaps people and then imprisons them in an unknown facility, torturing and forcing testimony prior to their official detention, should not come as a surprise. It is even more interesting that there was a leak of this “secret prison”, which hits the FSB.

Lawyers of two brothers accused of a subway bombing in Saint Petersburg stated that their clients were detained and tortured in the FSB “secret prison” near Moscow. The brothers Akram and Abror Azimovs claimed that they were subjected to electroshock, a simulated execution and they were beaten.

The attack on the Saint Petersburg metro took place on April 3, 2017. In a complaint to the Main Military Investigation Department of the Investigative Committee, Abror Azimov said that he was already detained on April 4. Meanwhile, it was officially reported that he was detained just on April 17. During those two weeks, he was imprisoned in an unknown place and forced to confess. His brother Akram Azimov was taken from a hospital bed by the Kyrgyz services in Bishkek on April 15. He was immediately deported to Russia – he

was put in the same place as his brother. Only after four days, the FSB declared that he had been detained. The information about the existence of the FSB secret prison was first published by the Russian portal Republic.ru on July 24, alleging that other suspected terrorists were also being held in the unknown centre, for example those who were suspected of killing Colonel Yuri Budanov or blowing up the Nevsky Express train.

The secret prison is located in the southeastern part of Moscow, somewhere in the Podolsk and Odintsovo areas. Suspects are interrogated and tortured here before official detention. It is not known whether the FSB officers or some hired people, such as former chekists, are the ones who interrogate the suspects. The prisoners testified that the personnel was in civilian clothes. It is not known whether the



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place officially belongs to the FSB. In truth, the “secret prison” might probably be some kind of an operational object; it could even be a single-detached house, formally unrelated neither to the FSB nor to the state at all. It is impossible to hide that such secret places are

also present in other countries around the world. Nonetheless, the mere fact of the media leak on this subject is even more interesting. This information hits the FSB – it can therefore be a part of the fight for kompromat inside Russia’s security apparatus.

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